

University of Groningen

Distance and Involvement : Visualising History in Patrice Chéreau's "La Reine Margot" (1994) and in Éric Rohmer's "L'Anglaise et le duc" (2001)

Hoogvliet, M.

Published in:
Relief

DOI:
[10.18352/relief.761](https://doi.org/10.18352/relief.761)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2012

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hoogvliet, M. (2012). Distance and Involvement : Visualising History in Patrice Chéreau's "La Reine Margot" (1994) and in Éric Rohmer's "L'Anglaise et le duc" (2001). *Relief*, 6(1), 66 - 79.
<https://doi.org/10.18352/relief.761>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

DISTANCE AND INVOLVEMENT:

Visualising History in Patrice Chéreau's *La Reine Margot* (1994) and in
Éric Rohmer's *L'Anglaise et le duc* (2001)

RELIEF 6 (1), 2012 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P 66-79

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-113711

Igitur publishing

© The author keeps the copyright of this article

This article analyses strategies of visualisation of the past in two French *films d'histoire*: *La Reine Margot* (1994) by directed by Patrice Chéreau and *L'Anglaise et le duc* (2001) by Éric Rohmer. Both films have modern political and societal implications: Chéreau's film contains several clear hints towards a reading of the “greatest massacre” of France's past as a critique of the modern era, while Rohmer rather wanted to make his audience aware of the ambiguities of the founding period of the French Republic. However, the two film directors have made use of completely different strategies for visualising the past and in order to involve their audiences: Chéreau by making a conscious use of visual anachronisms and Rohmer by a scrupulous reconstruction of a painterly historical vision.

This article discusses two French *films d'histoire* that evoke a distant past that modern viewers have not experienced themselves, nor did their parents or even their grandparents. Both films include the history of a woman that saved a refugee by hiding him in her bed, but, as will become clear below, their directors have different political intentions and they have chosen different strategies in order to represent the past by visual means. On the other hand, both films comment critically upon France's cultural memory and cast a different light on the values traditionally associated with French national heritage.

The first film is Patrice Chéreau's *La Reine Margot* that came out in 1994. The film is explicitly based on the partially fictional historical novel of the same title by Alexandre Dumas from 1845 (as announced on the poster and by the film titles), but, as will be discussed below, Chéreau has adapted his source very freely. It starts with the marriage ceremony of the French royal princess Marguerite de Valois

(1553-1615, called *la Reine Margot* in Dumas's novel) and the Protestant Henri de Navarre (1553-1610, later Henri IV, King of France) during the period of religious troubles in France opposing Catholics and Protestants. The festivities for the marriage that was supposed to unite Protestants and Catholics ended in the cruel massacres of Protestants during Saint Bartholomew's Day on 24 August 1572. The second half of the film tells how Marguerite and Henri escaped from the Louvre and the sinister de Valois family, intermingled with Marguerite's tragic love story with the Protestant Joseph de La Môle, in the film the same man that she saved from death by protecting him in her own bedchamber.

The second film is *L'Anglaise et le duc* from 2001, directed by Éric Rohmer. This film is also based on a text, the memories of the Scottish courtesan Grace Elliott (1758-1823) of her years in France during the Revolution and its aftermath, published posthumously in 1859 with the title *Journal of my life during the French Revolution*. Rohmer has followed the selected fragments from Grace's account as faithfully as possible, and the viewer is presented with the stories of how she saved the fugitive Marquis de Champcenetz by hiding him under her mattress, her friendship with Philippe-Égalité (duke Louis-Philippe d'Orléans (1747-1793), cousin of the French King and a supporter of the Revolution) with whom she had had an affair previously, her reactions to the violence of the Revolution, Philippe-Égalité's execution and her own imprisonment. With his film Rohmer adapted to the screen a story of the Revolution seen through the eyes of a foreigner and a royalist, something quite novel and shocking in France (Fumaroli).

Making a film about a historical period longer than three generations ago entails several challenges for a director. Firstly, how to make a distant past accessible for a modern audience: events and actions from the sixteenth or eighteenth centuries are not easily understood by a modern audience, because the language, habits, social logic and material culture differ profoundly from modern conventions. In a historical novel the author can give detailed explanations, but in a film many textual interruptions would be disturbing. Secondly, and this will be my main point here, a historical film does not only narrate events from the past, it also has to show them in such a way that it reflects correctly the past and yet at the same time in such a manner that a modern audience will understand and accept it, coined by Sarah Salih as "the reality effect". In this article I will reflect upon the strategies of visualisation chosen by Chéreau for *La Reine Margot* and by Rohmer for *L'Anglaise et le duc*: What are the visual signs indicating that we are looking to events from the past, and how have they been made relevant for a modern audience in order to support the messages about heritage and modern identities?

Most academic studies of historical films are more concerned with narration than with visualisation (Rosenstone, 15). According to Bélen Vidal this is a result of the anti-heritage critique and its deep distrust towards the visual: heritage films are thought to rely mainly on surface appearance turning them into a sort of pastiche

(16-17). Film directors often use a wide array of visual sources in order to convey to their audience the message that they are looking at events from the past, as if the film were an archaeological reconstruction: paintings (Bourget, 55-69), furniture, clothes and other historical artefacts. But the historical setting also creates a distance between the viewers and the story of the film, because, generally speaking, modern audiences are not familiar with the world of the past, as Colin Nettlebeck has observed: "The period artefacts, at least initially, act as a kind of visual filter, distancing the spectator from the action, rather than eliciting connection with the historical reality" (300, Moss, 131). A possible solution is the use of historical commonplaces to which modern audiences can relate more easily. According to Andrew Higson this often results in profoundly stereotypical film images of the Renaissance as "a spectacular space, a space of monumental architecture, a space filled with luxurious furnishings and fittings and rich costumes, a space of fabulous colour and texture" alternating with "raw mise-en-scènes, raw as opposed to civilised: the battle field, the torture chamber and the executioner's platform" (190). These latter elements "remind us of the distance of the past, suggesting that there was still some way to go before the dangers of medievalism could be left behind and the refinements of modernity could be fully attained – even if, in many ways, film-makers sought to establish parallels between past and present" (190).

Although this might be true for some films, this simplistic historical pitfall has been avoided by both Chéreau and Rohmer. As will be demonstrated below, the directors of the two *films d'histoire* under scrutiny here both have made intensive use of historical visual sources, most notably paintings, for the visualisation of the historical narratives of their film. Even if the two directors have found different solutions for the problem of bridging the historical gap and involving modern audiences emotionally, in both films the visual supports the political and moral lesson for modern society.

La Reine Margot

The political message of Patrice Chéreau's film *La Reine Margot* is not difficult to grasp and it was immediately understood by the French press (Vincendeau, Pidduck, 11, 90-94). The film is not only about the "greatest massacre" of the history of France that took place in 1572, as announced by the film titles: the long shots of apocalyptic piles of dead bodies in the streets of Paris and the corpses in mass graves are a visual reference to the Holocaust and the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. This reading is explicitly emphasised by the songs of the composer Goran Bregovic from the Balkans at the beginning and the end of the film: *U Te Sam Se Zaljubia* (I'm in love with you) a sad love song in Dalmatian (an ancient province of Croatia) and *Elohi/Canto nero* (My God/Dark song), an elegiac song in Ladino (the Judaeo-Spanish language of the Jews from Spain) sung by the Israeli pop singer Ofra Haza.

The political message of *La Reine Margot* is also directed at the French society of the 1990s. One of Chéreau's additions to Dumas's novel is the Jew Mendès in Amsterdam who is willing to help de La Môle's enterprise in order to free Henri de Navarre and Marguerite from the Louvre (Pidduck, 68). Mendès explains that he had to flee from Spain because he is married to a Catholic wife:

"Je suis Juif, ma femme est Chrétienne. Ma famille s'est convertie il y a longtemps, mais cela n'a rien changé parce que la loi nous interdit même les mariages avec les Catholiques. Ils veulent que le sang reste pur."

I'm a Jew, my wife is Christian. My family has converted a long time ago already, but that has not changed anything because the law even prohibits us to marry Catholics. They want the blood to remain pure.

This should obviously be read in the light of the political success of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who obtained almost 15% of the votes in France during the presidential election of 1988 with an openly xenophobic programme aimed against the Muslim population of France originating from the Maghreb. In the film the Catholic Coconas and the Protestant de La Môle seem to represent the diversity of the French population – both in the past and in the present – and, significantly, they end up several times in the same bed. De La Môle concludes that they are inseparable: *"Je ne peux pas éviter cet homme. Dieu l'a mis sur ma route. Il me poursuit sans cesse et s'il me retrouve pas c'est moi qui vais le chercher"*. (I cannot avoid this man. God has put him on my road. He is constantly chasing me and if he does not find me, I will go looking for him). At first bitter enemies, they end up sharing a fraternal love and will be executed together. The political message here seems to be that ordinary people can be united by fraternity, even if they are different, but it is the politicians that poison society with messages of intolerance and hate.

Chéreau's most important textual source of inspiration, Alexandre Dumas's novel *La Reine Margot*, is largely fictional, but also based on historical sources. Firstly Marguerite's own account of Saint Bartholomew's Day and the events that followed it (Viennot 1999, 69-214), but also several highly coloured polemical texts spreading anti-Valois propaganda: *Le discours merveilleux de la vie, actions et deportments de Catherine de Médicis, Royne-mère* printed for the first time in 1575 depicting the Queen-Mother Catherine de Médicis as a sinister and Machiavellian person who was the driving force behind Saint Bartholomew's Day and who poisoned her political enemies (Cazauran), and *Le divorce satyrique ou les amours de la reine Marguerite*, an anonymous pamphlet that circulated from the early seventeenth century onwards and that propagated the myth of Marguerite's incestuous and nymphomaniac sexual behaviour.

In the past years, women's history has started to untangle the historical facts and myths about Catherine de Médicis and Marguerite de Valois (Viennot 2005, Frommel and Wolf, Hoogvliet 2003, Hoogvliet 2007) and has replaced successfully

traditional misogynistic historical writings about female political power with a more balanced image of two intelligent women living in a time of unprecedented turmoil. Feminist historians as Geneviève Sellier have reproached Chéreau correctly that he has recycled and reinvigorated traditional misogynous narratives:

[Chéreau reprend] les pires pamphlets politico-pornographiques, sous prétexte d'une vision réaliste de la cour des Valois, pour faire de Marguerite une nymphomane qui part à la chasse au mâle dans les rues de Paris, quand ses amants de la cour lui font défaut [...] Il fait de Catherine de Médicis une figure mortifère, par son costume, son apparence physique, en lui attribuant la décision du massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy et, plus encore que chez Dumas, toute une série d'assassinats. (201)

Chéreau has used the worst political and pornographic political pamphlets, on the pretext of presenting a realistic vision of the Valois court, in order to make of Marguerite a nymphomaniac who goes hunting for a male in the streets of Paris, when she cannot find a lover at court [...] He makes of Catherine a murderous figure, by her costume, by her physical appearance, by attributing to her the decision of the slaughter of Saint Bartholomew's Day, and, even more than Dumas did, a series of murders.

Moreover, with Chéreau's political message to a modern French audience, one cannot but question his choice to have Catherine in *La Reine Margot* interpreted by the Italian actress Virna Lisi, using an exaggerated Italian accent. Traditional French historiography has emphasised the Italian identity of Catherine de Médicis, often referring to her as *la Florentine* (while in fact she had a French mother), in order to place the blame for the atrocities of Saint Bartholomew's Day outside France's responsibility, in the hands of this Machiavellian foreigner from Italy. On the other hand, in the film it is not Catherine alone, but the entire Valois clan, including her sons Anjou and Alençon, that incarnates incestuous love (as opposed to true love), ruthless hunger for power, and the poison of intolerance and hate. Moreover, as I will argue below, Chéreau's frequently use of anachronisms make sufficiently clear that *La Reine Margot* has no pretension at all of painting a "realistic vision of the Valois court".

In addition to placing the initiative for Saint Bartholomew's night in the hands of Catherine de Médicis, while in Dumas's novel it is King Charles IX who gives the order for the assassination of the Admiral de Coligny, Chéreau has taken other liberties with his textual source. For instance, in the film the Protestants all have positive connotations, while in Dumas's novel they are qualified as "proud" (*leur orgueil*) (8). Marguerite's intellectual side has completely disappeared, while in Dumas's novel she and the Duke de Guise communicate in Latin. Visually the most striking change is central position of Marguerite's blood stained white dress. This image has been used for the poster: here Marguerite (Isabelle Adjani) can be seen in full length, wearing a white dress soaked in blood and with her hands for her mouth in a gesture of fear and abhorrence (fig. 1). At first sight this is Marguerite's reaction to the bloody massacres of Saint Bartholomew's Day, especially because she wears a white dress that reminds of a bridal dress, visualising literally the

blood wedding (*noces de sang*). In her memories Marguerite actually describes that she had to change her nightgown because it was covered with blood from the fugitive and injured Viscount de Lérans (*Et changeant de chemise, parce qu'il m'avait toute couverte de sang... (99)*). Dumas has elaborated this short remark considerably:

Marguerite vit couler le sang, Marguerite sentit frissonner ce corps enlacé au sien [...].

"Ma sœur, s'écria-t-il [Alençon] en voyant Marguerite toute marbrée de sang, serais-tu blessée?" [...] "Non, dit-elle, je ne le crois pas, ou si je le suis, c'est légèrement. – Mais ce sang, dit le duc en parcourant de ses mains tremblantes tout le corps de Marguerite; ce sang d'où vient-il. [...]

"Non, rien, dit Marguerite, croisant son manteau pour qu'on ne vît point les taches de sang qui maculaient son peignoir (88-92).

Marguerite saw the blood poring down, Marguerite felt the shivering of this body [of de La Môle] pressed against hers [...].

"My sister, cried Alençon, seeing that Marguerite was entirely marbled with blood, is it possible that you are injured?" [...] "No, she said, I don't think so, and if I am, it is only a light injury. – But this blood, said the Duke, while running his trembling hands all over Marguerite's body; this blood, where does it come from. [...]

"No, nothing, said Marguerite, folding her coat around her so that nobody could see the blood that stained her gown.

However, in the film this blood stained dress only appears towards the end, and it is not the blood of the killing of Huguenots, but the blood of the poisoned King Charles IX and of Marguerite's beheaded lover de La Môle. Consequently, we must not only read Marguerite's gesture of abhorrence as a reaction to the killings of Saint Bartholomew's Day, she is also profoundly shocked by the dreadful actions of her hateful and intolerant family.

Visual aspects as the blood stained dress and especially references to historical paintings play an important role in Chéreau's film (Pidduck, 63-69). Portraits from the period clearly have been an important source of inspiration for the main characters in the film and their costumes: Marguerite during the wedding ceremony has much in common with several portraits of Elizabeth of Austria by the painter François Clouet, one of them now in the Louvre; Charles IX looks exactly like a portrait of François Ier by Jean Clouet; Anjou wears the earrings that appear in several of his portraits, for instance on a painting now in Versailles; Henri de Navarre has the same wild hairdo as on a drawing now in the Archives Nationales; Charles IX's wet-nurse is a close copy of the woman in the background of the portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrées and her sister in bath, now in the Louvre.

In an interview Chéreau acknowledges the use of paintings, but his goal was to create moving pictures:

"Même s'il y a une dimension picturale dans le film, j'ai essayé de ne jamais faire de tableaux. Avec Moïse Bickel, la créatrice des costumes, nous avons regardé des peintures. Zurbaran par exemple, pour les robes des femmes, ou Rembrandt pour les hommes, et Georges de La Tour" (17).

Even if the film contains a painterly dimension, I have tried avoid making a painting.

Together with Moidele Bickel, the designer of the costumes, we have looked at paintings. Zurbarán for instance, for the dresses of the women, or Rembrandt for the men, and Georges de La Tour.

As he has done with his textual sources, Chéreau has also taken enormous liberties with his visual sources, most notably by introducing visual elements from completely different periods. Firstly, the film also contains visual references to paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, during the scene of the wounded de La Môle in Marguerite's bedchamber, the *clair-obscur* lighting and Marguerite herself are strongly reminiscent of several paintings of the repentant Mary Magdalene by the seventeenth-century painter Georges de La Tour (1593-1659). And, in fact, Marguerite is not unlike Mary Magdalene: both women have abjured a life of sin and sexual excesses. In the film Marguerite has visibly undergone an internal and external transformation because through de La Môle she has learned to know true love.

La Reine Margot contains more anachronistic visual references: Marguerite wearing a black mask during her search for a lover through the streets of Paris strongly reminds of similar masked women in Pietro Longhi's paintings (as in *The Rhinoceros* (1751), Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Venice). Several references to the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Rembrandt can be detected: the groups of Protestant men and women in Amsterdam have been inspired by his portraits, and the scene of René the Florentine opening the skull of a corpse in order to predict the future of Catherine's sons (in Dumas's novel it was a chicken) has much in common with Rembrandt's paintings of doctors dissecting a body (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum and Historisch Museum).

Yet Chéreau's visual anachronisms go even further than this: in some cases Catherine de Médici's dresses have more in common with those of the wicked witches in Disney films than with historical costumes. All men in the film wear semi-historical jackets with lace collars, but they wear it loose, showing their chests, not unlike the way modern men would wear leather jackets. The Catholic men in the film all wear a rather big crucifix around their neck. This is not historical, but a 1980s fashion element, introduced by Madonna in her video-clips for *Holiday* and *Like a Virgin*. Very similar crucifixes are still being worn by the famous French pop singer Johnny Halliday. In fact, Chéreau's film has borrowed much of its visual language from 1980s video-clips, especially the long shots of Marguerite's/Isabella Adjani's face without any narrative action, in unnatural blue or yellow lighting.

We could, of course, reproach Chéreau carelessness because of the anachronisms in his films, as Peter Burke wrote about this subject: they would have been "the result of carelessness or a failure to realise how much attitudes and values have changed over the long term" (161). Nevertheless, I would like to argue here that in *La Reine Margot* Chéreau has made a deliberate use of visual

anachronisms: they bridge the gap between the historical elements and a modern audience. The anachronisms have as a result that a modern audience will feel more involved with the historical events evoked on screen and they make clear that the film is not only about “them”, but even more about “us”.

L'Anglaise et le duc

As in *La Reine Margot*, historical paintings play an important role in Éric Rohmer's historical film *L'Anglaise et le duc*. For this film situated in the historical period immediately following the French Revolution, known as *la Terreur*, Éric Rohmer and his collaborators have made extensive use of historical paintings, together with the most modern digital techniques for superimposition (*incrustation*) in order to place moving actors convincingly in the space of painted décors (fig. 2). In Françoise Etchegaray's documentary “*L'Anglaise et le Duc : Un film révolutionnaire*” the painter of the backgrounds, Jean-Baptiste Marot, and the designer of the costumes, Pierre-Jean Larroque, both explain how they have used paintings and pastel drawings from exactly this period as their main source of information; they mention works by Jean-Baptiste Genillion, Louis Léopold Boilly, Baptiste Mallet and Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.

In the film we see Grace Elliot and the other actors moving through the entirely painted, three dimensional and manifestly artificial cityscape of eighteenth-century Paris. The indoor scenes give the same impression of artificiality, as if the director has not tried to conceal that he has used painted hardboard stage décors. The language used by the actors is unusual and archaic (Grace Elliot employs frequently the highly literate *imparfait du subjonctif*) and this aspect, too, helps to create a distance between the film and a modern viewer. Some critics of the film has interpreted this as a Brechtian ‘*Verfremdungseffekt*’, as, for instance, Colin Nettelbeck, who also notes “the sustained unreality of the sets”, to conclude that Rohmer's “use of digital sets for the exterior scenes is from this angle a clear distancing device, designed to block the viewer from any temptation to see the film as a reconstruction of historical reality” (301).

Initially, this interpretation might seem logical, but when reading and hearing Éric Rohmer's own comments upon his film, he testifies of completely opposite intentions: his film is actually intended to reflect the authenticity of surviving historical sources. In fact, Rohmer did not want to distance his audience at all, quite to the contrary, he wanted to bring them as close as possible to the reality of historical events.

In his “*Note d'intention*”, Rohmer stated about other films evoking the period of the French Revolution:

Ces films, même les plus élaborés, ont la prétention naïve de faire de nous les spectateurs directs des événements qu'ils relatent en ne font par là que rendre plus douteuse la vérité qu'ils prétendent

découvrir.

These films, even the most elaborated ones, have the naïve claim to turn us into witnesses of the historical events that they recount and in this manner they make the truth that they pretend to uncover even more doubtful.

In the view of Rohmer it is, paradoxically, only through the filter of the objective view of someone who has experienced the events in reality, that the historical truth can be uncovered:

Il semble, au contraire, que, pour un œil prévenu contre les mensonges de l'écran, l'objectivité du regard ne peut être atteinte que par le filtre d'une première subjectivité. En d'autres termes, la relation d'un témoin a beau être partielle, partielle, mensongère, son existence n'en est pas moins, en tant que relation même, indéniable. (Note d'intention)

However, for an eye that has been informed about the lies of the screen, an objective look can only be realised through the filter of a primary subjectivity. In other words, even if the account of a witness is partial, biased, false, this does not diminish its very existence, and as a discourse it cannot be denied.

As is the case with original accounts of historical events, historical paintings contain this primary vision:

Qu'est-ce que c'est une vision du passé? Ce qui nous reste de lui à travers les objets qu'il nous a laissés, à travers les peintures ou à travers les textes. (Rohmer 2001, 56)

What is a vision of the past? That what is left of it through the objects that it has bequeathed to us, through paintings or through texts.

Rohmer was not interested in making an historical illusion of photographic quality, but he wanted to represent the past following the vision of painted historical documents:

Oui, la réalité photographique m'importe peu. Ici, je montre la Révolution comme la voyaient ceux qui l'ont vécue. Et je cherche à rendre les personnages plus proches de la réalité picturale. Le film commence par des tableaux, et j'aimerais qu'un spectateur non averti s' imagine qu'il s'agit de documents d'époque, et soit surpris de voir ces tableaux s'animer... (Ferenczi)

Yes, I am not very interested in a photographic reality. Here, I show the Revolution as those who witnessed it, actually have seen it. And I try to represent the characters more closely to the pictorial reality. The film starts with paintings, and I would like that an uninformed member of the audience will think that these are historical documents and that he will be surprised to see these paintings come alive...

The interior and exterior décors all have been made based on original historical documentation, as plans, paintings and engravings. It was never Rohmer's intention to reproduce these in all their details, it was their authenticity that counted most:

Nous sommes partis non seulement de tableaux et de gravures, mais de plans de l'époque. Quant aux intérieurs, ils ne sont pas "naturels", mais tous construits dans un studio annexe [...] Pour moi ce travail n'est pas de la méticulosité, c'est une quête d'authenticité qui est à la base même du film. (Ferenczi)

We started to work not only from paintings and engravings, but also from maps of the period. As far as the interiors are concerned, these are not "natural", but all constructed in a nearby studio. [...] For me this work is not about being meticulous, but it is a search for authenticity that is at the very basis of this film.

Rohmer stated several times that he was very scrupulous: he wanted to stay as closely as possible to the historical language (Ferenczi) and he was interested in all kinds of historical details that historians do not bother to research. For instance, for the scene with Grace fleeing to Meudon by night, Rohmer has checked the quarter of the moon at exactly that date (Etchegaray). Authenticity based on detailed research of historical documents is what comes closest to reality, according to Rohmer:

Je n'aime pas tricher : j'aime prendre la réalité telle qu'elle est, même si, ici, c'est moi qui la produisais par le tableau. (Ferenczi)

I don't like to cheat: I like to take reality as it is, even if, here, I am the one that has produced it by means of the painting.

It is by this process of visual inversion that Rohmer intended to add historical truth to his work (Schifano, 118), but with what goal? The film *L'Anglaise et le duc* has often been read as a critique of the great founding myths of the French Republic (Fumaroli, Nettelbeck), but Rohmer has denied categorically that he had any political intentions in making his film:

Je n'ai pas fait ce film pour des raisons politiques, je n'y défends aucun parti, ni royaliste, ni anti-royaliste. (Ferenczi)

I have not made this film for political reasons, I don't defend any party, not the royalists, not the anti-royalists.

It is true that Rohmer's film does not contain a simplistic message about who was good and who was not during the French Revolution, and the main characters are, in fact, ambiguous, as Rohmer wrote in his *Note d'intention*:

De même, ici, certaines contradictions entre la parole et l'acte viennent étoffer la consistance du personnage et préserver son mystère.

Likewise, certain contradictions between what a person says and what he/she does, contribute to the consistency of a character and to the preservation his/her mystery.

In the film the main characters turn out not to be what they pretend to be. The Duke has chosen the side of the Revolution, but did he vote for the execution of the

King because he hoped to become king himself? Grace states several times that she is a royalist, but it transpires that she acted as an intermediary for Charles James Fox, an Englishman who supported the Revolution. The same can be said about Rohmer's film: it shows us the ambiguities of history. Through the eyes of Grace Elliott we see the horrible, destructive and brutal side of the Revolution – and this is in modern France indeed something still unheard of –, but at the same time Grace commands her servants in a way that we would find unacceptable, and when she flees from Paris to Meudon, she does not take her servant with her, but tells her bluntly to walk all the way back through the streets with the horrors and dangers they have just experienced. In the end Rohmer's intentions are not political, but he wants to involve his audience in history:

Mon propos [est] de continuer à entretenir chez les spectateurs, par le cinéma, le goût de l'histoire. Actuellement, dans les écoles, l'histoire a une place de plus en plus réduite. Dans le divertissement, dans le cinéma, il y a de l'histoire, mais très stéréotypée, dans laquelle beaucoup d'aspects n'apparaissent pas. (Rohmer 2001, 53)

My goal is to continue to keep alive with the audience, by means of cinema, a liking for history. At this moment, in the schools, history has a diminishing place. In the entertainment, in the cinema, there is history, but very stereotyped, in which many aspects do not appear.

Conclusion

Modern films about the past all have to find a solution for the problem of presenting their audience with a convincing visual reconstruction of the past, while at the same time they have to invite their modern viewers to engage emotionally and intellectually with the events represented on screen. For *La Reine Margot* Patrice Chéreau has used the examples of historical paintings for the costumes, jewels and hairstyles; in some cases the actors actually look like historical portraits of their character. Moreover, some scenes in the film can be seen as visual citations of paintings from the historical context of the events recounted by the film. Yet at the same time Chéreau has taken enormous liberties with his textual and visual sources: visually his film does not only reproduce the context of the sixteenth century, he has also introduced visual elements from completely different periods, from seventeenth-century Rembrandt paintings to modern visual culture as expressed by video-clips. Chéreau's use of visual anachronisms element should not be seen as a shortcoming of his film: it helps modern audiences to engage with the events of the film and it should make them aware that intolerance and hate are not only phenomena of the past.

Historical paintings have also been used by Éric Rohmer and his collaborators for the film *L'Anglaise et le duc*, but Rohmer had a completely different approach to visualisation of the past and involving his audience. For Rohmer authenticity and the historical reality are of utmost importance, especially the

authenticity of first hand experiences as communicated by historical eye-witness accounts and paintings. In his film he has presented to his audience a manifestly artificial visual reconstruction of the past, but, paradoxically, based on a close scrutiny of historical sources. Rohmer's film situated in the period of *la Terreur* has been interpreted as a critique of France's cultural memory concerning the foundations of the *République*, but for Rohmer his most important goals were showing the ambiguities of history and involving modern audiences in the authenticity of an historical experience.

The analysis of visualisation in *La Reine Margot* and *L'Anglaise et le duc* has resulted in uncovering completely opposite strategies of both film directors, thus making clear that historical films do not only narrate a history: they also provide us with a depiction of the past.



Fig. 1: The original film poster for *La Reine Margot*.



Fig. 2: Actors moving through the painted background in *L'Anglaise et le Duc* (painting by Jean-Baptiste Marot).

Works quoted:

Jean-Loup Bourget, *L'histoire au cinéma : le passé retrouvé*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001.

Nicole Cazauran (ed.), *Discours merveilleux de la vie, actions et deportements de Catherine de Médicis, Royne-mère*, Geneva, Droz, 1995.

Patrice Chéreau, (Entretien avec Patrice Chéreau et Danièle Thompson), *Cahiers du cinéma* 479/480 (Mai 1994), pp. 12-19.

Alexandre Dumas, *La Reine Margot* (ed. Claude Schopp), Paris, Robert Laffont, 1992.

Françoise Etchegaray, "L'Anglaise et le Duc : Un film révolutionnaire" (Documentary on the DVD *L'Anglaise et le Duc*, 2002).

Aurélien Ferenczi, "Entretien avec Éric Rohmer" (on the DVD *L'Anglaise et le Duc*, 2002).

Sabine Frommel and Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *Il mecenatismo di Caterina de' Medici. Poesia, feste, musica, pittura, scultura, architettura*, Venice, Marsilio, 2008.

Andrew Higson, "Private Lives and Public Conflicts: The English Renaissance on Film 1998-2010", in Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete (eds.), *Filming and Performing Renaissance History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 178-192.

Margriet Hoogvliet, "Princely Culture and Catherine de Médicis", in Martin Gosman, Alasdair MacDonald et al. (eds.), *Princes and Princely Culture (vol. I)*, Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp. 103-130.

Margriet Hoogvliet, "The *Balet de la Reyne* (1609) and the politics of *vertu*: media and communication", in Martin Gosman and Joop Koopmans (eds.), *Selling and Rejecting Politics*, Leuven, Peeters, 2007, pp. 71-91.

Mark Moss, *Toward the Visualization of History: The Past as Image*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2008.

Colin Nettlebeck, "Rohmer's Fifth Season? L'Anglaise et le Duc and Triple Agent", *Modern & contemporary France* 16/3 (2008), pp. 297-312.

Julianne Pidduck, *French Film Guide: La Reine Margot*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2005.

Éric Rohmer, "Note d'intention (1999)" (on the DVD *L'Anglaise et le Duc*, 2002).

Éric Rohmer, "Je voulais que la réalité devienne tableau", *Cahiers du Cinéma* 559 (Juillet-Août 2001), pp. 50-58.

Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1995.

Sarah Salih, "Cinematic Authenticity-Effects and Medieval Art: A Paradox", in Anke Bernau and Bettina Bildhauer (eds.), *Medieval Film*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009, pp. 20-39.

Laurence Schifano, "L'invention filmique du dix-huitième siècle", in Martial Poirson and Laurence Schifano (eds.), *L'écran des Lumières: regards cinématographiques sur le XVIII^e siècle*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2009, pp. 101-119.

Geneviève Sellier, "Deux adaptations de La Reine Margot d'A. Dumas au cinéma: Jean Dréville (1954) et Patrice Chéreau (1994)", in Geneviève Sellier, Odile Krakovitch and Éliane Viennot (eds.), *Femmes de pouvoir : mythes et fantasmes*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2001, pp. 205-218.

Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation*, London, Wallflower, 2012.

Éliane Viennot (ed.), *Marguerite de Valois : Mémoires et autres écrits, 1574-1614*, Paris, Champion, 1999.

Éliane Viennot, *Marguerite de Valois : La reine Margot*, Paris, Perrin, 2005.

Ginette Vincendeau, "Unsettling memories", *Sight & Sound* 5/7 (1995), pp. 30-33.